

An abstract painting with a vibrant color palette of blues, greens, and reds. The background is a textured, layered composition of these colors, with small white and red speckles scattered throughout. In the foreground, a piece of fabric, possibly a tarp or a piece of clothing, is draped and folded, showing a mix of the same colors. The overall mood is one of depth and complexity, with a sense of light and shadow.

Anne Labovitz

BEACONS OF HOPE



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September 16 – October 13, 2021
Concordia University, St. Paul
Curated by Dr. Megan Arney Johnston

Installation photography by Bailey Tillman



Installation view



Hope Sculpture I, 2021
 109" x 59" x 47"
 Acrylic on Tyvek®



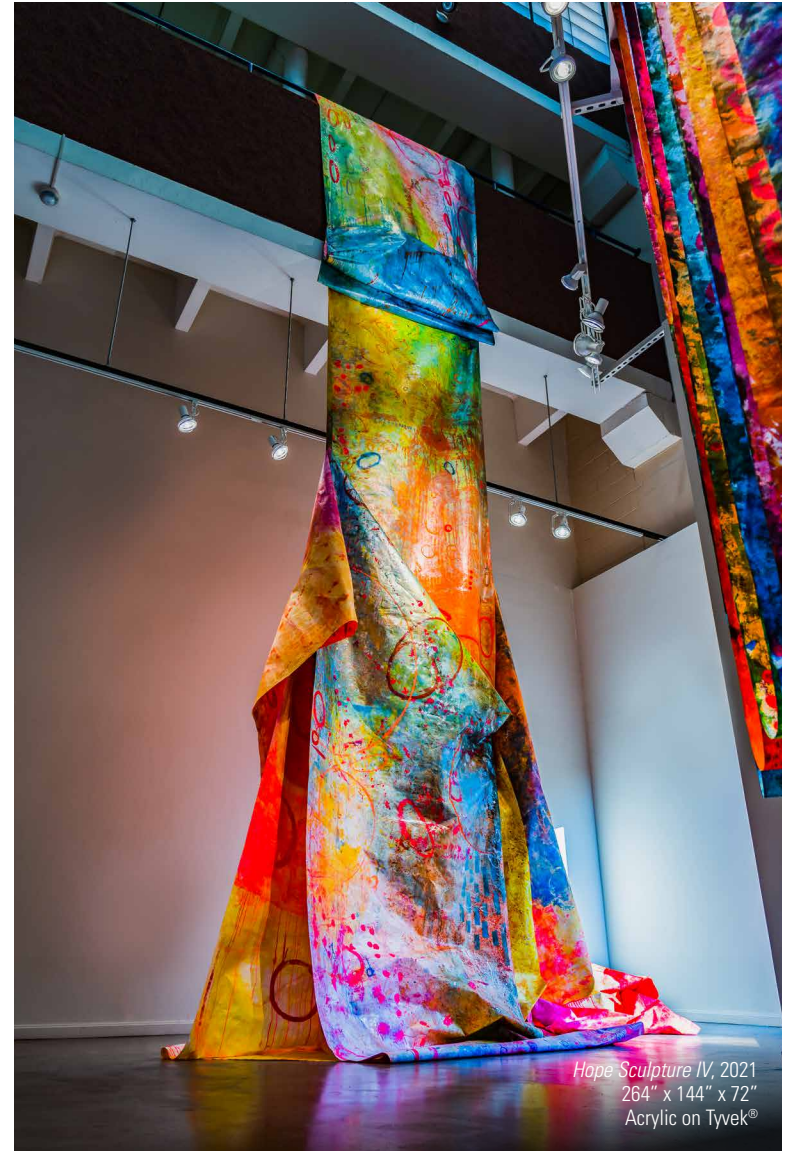
Hope Sculpture II, 2021
 96" x 120" x 96"
 Acrylic on Tyvek®



Installation view



Hope Sculpture III, 2021
124" x 60" x 96"
Acrylic on Tyvek®



Hope Sculpture IV, 2021
264" x 144" x 72"
Acrylic on Tyvek®



Hope Room, 2021
96" x 120" x 120"
Acrylic on Tyvek®

Notes:

- 1 Eliza Goran, Shefali W. Kulkarni, and Kanvakit Vongkiatkajorn, Dec. 18, 2020, "The *Washington Post* Asked Readers to Describe 2020 in one Word or Phrase." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/2020-in-one-word/>. Retrieved August 13, 2021.
- 2 Claudia Bloeser and Titus Stahl, 2017, "Hope," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/>. Retrieved August 13, 2021.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Adrienne Martin, 2014, *How we Hope: A Moral Psychology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 5 Adam Grant, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing," *New York Times*, April 19, 2021.

The Entanglement of Hope

Dr. Megan Arney Johnston

In December 2020, the *Washington Post* asked readers to describe the tumultuous past year with one word. Relentless, lost, chaotic, surreal, and exhausting were some of the words offered. They also asked readers to say what they were hopeful for in 2021. Readers responded with "uniting the world," "rebuilding faith in our democracy," "solve some of the most pressing problems," and "health for everyone."¹ Instead of considering these responses as altruistic, we could see them as expressions of humanity's entanglement with hope and its generative promises for the future. The concept of hope is not ephemeral or whimsical, nor pendantic or simple, but a considered, serious response to the contemporary condition.

Today we find artists who are part of the political movement in contemporary art to resuscitate and facilitate relational dialogue through creativity. Hope as a relational construct is central in the work of Anne Labovitz. It is presented in her exhibition *Beacons of Hope* in multiple ways, conceptually, physically, and spatially. Through her work, Labovitz is asking something radical of the audience—use hope to engage and connect with others and oneself.

Hope as a Conceptual Construct

To start, we might consider the conceptual idea of hope. Immanuel Kant's definition of hope is an "unexpected offering of the prospect of immeasurable good fortune."² He believed that the three primary objects of hope were one's own happiness and moral progress and

the moral improvement of the human race as a whole.³ For Kant and other scholars, hope is both cognitive and conative, that is, a theory of the mind and of value. Indeed, the philosophy of hope centers on two key sets of questions: What is the nature of hope? and What are the values of hope? Both ideas contribute to a complex understanding of hope. How do we analyze the nature of hope? How does hope motivate us? Is there only one type of hope? Consider the expression "hoping against hope." According to Adrienne Martin, we hope when we highly value the object of our hope but do not expect it to happen.⁴ Yet we still hope. Considering the last eighteen months of the pandemic, along with the divisive election and civil unrest, it seems that disconnection and languishment⁵ are widespread. Engaging in hope is, indeed, a radical act.

The second question concerns the value of hope. Is it good to hope? Is there virtue in hoping? Hope is often contrasted with despair and fear, with the former indicating an absence of hope. But despair also includes pain and suffering. Conversely, can we logically extrapolate that hope includes strength and connection? Labovitz's work asks us to engage in this possibility. The color-saturated sculptures grow from the floor, rising up to heights we can barely make out. We want to see the top, the entire work. We look up to see. We hope to see the work. There is tension in the sculpture, it twists and turns, hung by a thin, nearly invisible string. We hope it stays up—we know it will.

Radical Kindness Perpetuates Hope

Radical kindness is a mechanism that Labovitz embodies in her work, and it manifests itself in her affective use of color. Labovitz believes that color is a life force. Indeed, her use of color is highly moving for viewers who often lean into the work, try to touch it, connect with it physically and emotionally. This is intentional on the part of the artist, who pushes — demands — the audience to engage. For example, Labovitz’s “Hope Room” is an enveloping, color-saturated room. The blue gels on the lights heighten this emotive space. The room engenders an intense response; we are enveloped in color and light in an intimate space. We might recall the Rothko Chapel as a color-saturated place immured in hues and values of various colors. Or the abstract work of Jack Whitten, with his strong sense of movement and gestural mark-making. Here we find beauty and intensity, connection and engagement. Labovitz explains, “I make work that is interactive and participatory as well as unrepentantly beautiful.” She offers up to the audience an intense color experience as a gesture of radical kindness.

Yet while Labovitz is inspired by these artists, her practice sits in a unique space — the edge of abstract expressionism and the cerebral edge of conceptualism. In that way, her work is also about ideas, particularly through the viewer’s unique discovery and interaction. I see her connected conceptually to artists such as Hervé Tullet with her show *Shape and Color* at Albright-Knox Northland (2021), who believes in the collaborative and interactive experience. Or to Liam Gillick, who uses color to “provoke internal intellectual questioning and thoughtful discussion of the sociopolitical.”⁶ For Labovitz, there is an

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- 6 Ross Tilden Millner, Martha Sullivan, and Chris Pritchett, 2016, “Liam Gillick: Color Usage in Conceptual Art.” <https://blogs.lt.vt.edu/rossmillner/design-thinking/color/liam-gillick-color-usage-in-conceptual-art/>. Retrieved August 13, 2021.

urgency behind the work. “For years I have examined and engaged through my practice the importance of human connection and its visual embodiment. Themes of connection, seeing one and other, community building, and relational exchange have been the driving force of my studio practice.”

The Physicality, Materiality, and Spatial Qualities of Hope

It’s worth unpacking Labovitz’s use of material as an alternative to traditional ways of thinking and making. The use of Tyvek, acrylic, grommets, and engagement are unorthodox materials, and the combination inverts conventional and traditional practices. We might recall the work of Marta Minujín, an Argentine artist whose colorful works are part sculpture, part painting and often sit in three-dimensional space on both the wall and in the gallery, obtrusively interrupting that space. Her show at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (1999) presented sculptural paintings hung directly from the ceiling. Patrick Heron’s “Three Banners” at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital were also hung from the ceiling, poetically extended into the gallery space, where they quivered in the air movement created by the humans below. Like Minujín and Heron, Labovitz, in her exhibit at Concordia Gallery, presents both painting and sculpture. But Labovitz’s work is more like a visual vortex, a mass of whirling and circular motion that forms a cavity or vacuum. And in that way, they are more dynamic.

There is also an intriguing tension between time and space, things Labovitz is extraordinarily intentional about. The sculptures are paintings — the paintings are sculpture. Both take up space to challenge

the preconceived notions of what we think those mediums should be and how they should be presented in a space. They are a direct challenge to the white cube while also sitting beautifully in it. The installation is powerful. Labovitz asks us to reconsider space and time by briefly suspending time in her works. We imagine them coming alive at any moment. We hope they do.

That hope is central in a contemporary art space speaks volumes about the artist’s confidence. Hopefulness creates confidence, which, if derived from the right sources, can lead to the virtue of courage. Indeed, *Beacons of Hope* is a courageous hang. The use of height and minimalist installation is expansive. There is a counterbalance to the intimate space of “Hope Room” and the activated space of the engagement walls.

Labovitz’s installations refuse to adhere to conventional curatorial constructs. All of the sculptural works are site specific, and she will never be able to replicate any of them. Labovitz engages with each site and its respective audience in bespoke ways because of the material and specific hanging requirements. These are not just paintings, not static sculptures. Rather, they move like organic — living — responsive beings.

I also see Labovitz’s work as political and connected to the idea of natality. Hannah Arendt introduces natality as a conceptual moment when one is born into the political sphere, where acting together can create the truly unexpected. According to Arendt, the natality of human beings allows them to make new beginnings in their actions and thus subvert the tendency of public space to disintegrate into routinized behavior. Therefore, natality is a precondition of genuine political

action and a necessary condition for the possibility of hope.⁷ Labovitz explains, “I am interested in connecting my community and beyond, facilitating a better understanding of this complex world. Yet, I am conscious of the enormity of this endeavor.”

Hope as a Process of Connection and Engagement

Labovitz presents work that is responsive to the Concordia Gallery space and engaging to its publics. Embodying hope, connection, and solitude, she has created 200 6x6 inch squares for the public to engage with and co-create on. “The small paintings represent the audience and their connection to each other and the viewer/participant. I welcome people (students, faculty, departments, public) into the exhibition through discussions, collaboration, and participation within the gallery, classroom, or other sites. Then, when viewing the work, gallery-goers see and feel themselves as part of a larger, holistic community at Concordia University, St. Paul.”

Hope facilitates human and creative agency in this exhibition. A surface understanding of cultural agency is the ability to engage with creativity. But Labovitz goes further and asks us to engage and reimagine through hope. Her’s is a call for cognitive dissonance: where we feel the belief in hope conflicting with the difficulty of hoping. Her confidence and request for hope from the audience extends to the engagement element in the exhibition. The participatory wall is a recurring theme in Labovitz’s exhibitions and socially engaged practice. The offering of small works on paper to the audience, who in turn create their own intimate works, is a gesture of radical, optimistic kindness. The process in the

shared galley space usurps the idea of artist-as-genius and enables co-creation, energy, and participation. The audience becomes an active agent, or investor, in the creative process, which is where real creative agency happens.

There is strength of conviction and a plethora of intense emotions reflected in the exhibition, but it is the confidence in these works that exude hope most of all. Through color, urgent mark-making, engagement, and challenging spatial relations, Labovitz asks us to engage in searching for hope. In art and in life, Anne Labovitz challenges the viewer to engage in hope against all odds.

Dr. Megan Arney Johnston is an independent curator, museum specialist, and educator who uses socially engaged curatorial practices centered on fundamental questions about art and its display and mediation. Dr. Arney Johnston is a noted specialist in social engagement, having coined the phrase slow curating in 2011. She received her PhD in Museology and Curatorial Practice from the University of Ulster, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Curatorial appointments include institutions in Europe and the United States, where she has produced more than 330 exhibitions over her 25-year career. She has written dozens of exhibition catalog essays and articles for academic journals in addition to presenting on social practice and radical museology at numerous national and international conferences. For more information, please see slowcurating.com.

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⁷ Hannah Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 247.

Anne Labovitz Biography

Anne Labovitz (b. Duluth) lives and works in St. Paul, MN. Recent projects include two permanent public mosaic artworks at the MSP Airport, February 2021 as well as *122 Conversations* currently installed in MSP airport Terminal 2 from 2019-2023; an artist-in-residency at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN; Turn Up the Turn Out—a cohort of 22 artists dedicated to the promotion of voting and voting registration in Minnesota (2020); an outdoor fence installation in Berlin, Germany (2021); a public art commission at the Redleaf Center For Family Healing, a site-specific participatory work (2021); the *I Love You Institute*, a community-based art project supported by a Springboard for the Arts community grant (2020); Artist in Residence with exhibition at Art In Motion, in Holdingford, MN (2020-2021) and *Response*, a solo show at Burnet Fine Art. Her current long-term social practice project is the *I Love You Institute*, an artist-led site-specific project urgently working with communities to address today's world creatively. It combines art-making, social justice, radical kindness, and relational listening to normalize, saying "I Love You" as an alternative to division and conflict.

Her upcoming projects include solo shows at Concordia University, St. Paul (2021), the Festival Unbound artist residency in Bethlehem, PA (2021); the Minnesota Marine Art Museum, Winona (2022) and Rochester Art Center (2023).

Notable exhibitions include University of Raparin, Rania, Iraqi Kurdistan; Växjö Kunsthall, Växjö, Sweden; Petrozavodsk City Exhibition Hall, Petrozavodsk, Russia; Isumi City Hall, Isumi City, Japan; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Canada; Tweed Museum, Duluth, MN; Athenaeum in La Jolla, CA; Crary Art Gallery, Warren, PA; Burnet Gallery, Le Méridien Chambers in Minneapolis; Talgut die Schönen, in Kunste, Germany; Chapman Art Center at Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, New York; to name a few.

Labovitz's artwork can be found in the many local, national and international public and private collections. Her artwork can be found in various public and private collections including: Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport Collection; Frederick R Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul; The Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth; The Athenaeum Music & Arts Library, La Jolla, CA; Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; International Gallery of Portrait, in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Växjö Kommun, City of Vaxjo, Sweden; Isumi City Offices, Isumi City Japan; University of Raparin, Rania Iraqi Kurdistan; and City of Petrozavodsk, Petrozavodsk, Russia.

Anne Labovitz Artist Statement

"Hope is not just a feel-good emotion, but a dynamic cognitive motivational system."
— *Psychology Today*

I examine and engage with the importance of human connection and its visual embodiment. Themes of connection, seeing one another, community building, and relational exchange have been the driving force of my practice. This new, site-specific work is a departure for me; the painting, sculpture, installation, and engagement reflect important changes in my practice.

The painted scrolls hang with voluminous twists and turns that reveal evolution in both scale and sculptural investigation. I'm manifesting ideas in a sculptural form, giving them three-dimensionality and perhaps engendering a more active looking experience.

In the *Hope Room* I aim to envelope the viewer in a color-filled environment to evoke an emotive experience. The third element consists of works entitled *Hope Wall I* and *Hope Wall II*, which are public invitations to participate in the gallery. In collaborating with gallery visitors to compose the works, the meaning of the *Hope Walls* is co-created, giving critical cultural agency to the audience/participants/viewers.

These works offer a proposition of hope as an informed optimistic choice to imagine possibilities. Hope is generative, providing opportunities for ideation and the propagation of new ideas, new outcomes, and new capabilities. Hope is an act of defiance and resistance to current contexts; my aim is to provide the viewer a pause for a generative moment of hope.

The visitor bears witness to other humans' visual representation of their hopes and dreams by visiting the gallery, and experiencing the installation. This creative agency can provide the visitor a place for compassion, expanding perspectives, and a moment to engage optimism.

In the face of adversity, hope is a radical choice.



Hope Sculpture III (detail), 2021
124" x 60" x 96"
Acrylic on Tyvek®



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UNIVERSITY-SAINT PAUL